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THE PARABLE OF THE FIELD.

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The problem—The universal claim of Christianity.—Its apparent failure to make the claim good.—The solution found in the parable.

THE originality of Christ's teachings, visible everywhere, is concentrated in his parables. In these, by a few graphic touches, he makes us all clearly see some truth, which otherwise would be difficult to grasp. This is particularly true of that parable which is usually called "The Sower." It is really the parable of the field, and only one of several parables of the sower. It is the parable, not of the preacher but of the hearer. It not only sets before us, but it solves, the strange problem which confronts every preacher, every pastor, every Christian worker, who is trying to lead others to a knowledge of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus.

What is that problem? It is presented by the evident discrepancy between the claims and the success of Christianity. Christ demands the allegiance of every human heart. Christianity claims to be, not *a* religion but *the* religion, the universal and only religion. Christ says that he is "the way, the truth, the life." Yet what Christian worker does not know, that when we try to proclaim the teaching of Christ, it does not seem to make good his claims by its success. Moreover this absolute, universal claim of Christianity is not a result of circumstances, or a growth of history, like, for example, the pope's claim to supreme authority. The carpenter of Nazareth taught the fishermen of Bethsaida an absolutism which recognizes no exceptions and permits no appeal from its authority. And those fishermen in their turn, wove into the very constitution and life of the early church this claim to absolute and universal dominion. The ruthless persecution to which Christianity was exposed, almost from the first, might have been to a great extent escaped, had Christianity been content with a place among other religions,

or with an empire over certain nations or races. The whole struggle of Christianity with heathenism is characterized and inspired by the insatiable universality and the indomitable absolutism of the new religion. It would not tolerate being tolerated. It neither gave nor received quarter. It not only refused to surrender anything, but it demanded from all, unconditional surrender.

Seeing then that is of the very essence of Christianity to seek all men for its own; seeing that it claims to respond to the real need of every human heart; it is passing strange to find so many who are unresponsive to its claims and rebellious against its sway. This is the problem of the field; the discrepancy between what it claimed for the seed and what is seen of the crop. We are familiar with this discrepancy elsewhere. Take the analogy used in the parable itself. How often the glowing descriptions in the seedsman's catalogue disappoint us! We plant the vaunted seed, and look in vain for the thirtyfold, sixtyfold, hundredfold promised. But when we read the Bible catalogue of the Divine Seedsman, we do not anticipate such disappointments.

As we try to speak Christ's words, we see before us that array of upturned faces. We know how great is the need that underlies so many different expressions. We have the glad tidings, the truth of the gospel. From our own experience and what others tell us, we recognize that there is not a need in all the world, which the message of salvation will not satisfy. Is it not a strange thing? Here are the hungry, and we offer them bread, and they will not eat it. Here are the thirsty, and we bring them water, and they will not drink it. Here are the lame, the deaf, the dumb, the blind, the fevered, the leprous, and we have healing medicine for all, but they will not receive it. Here are the dying, who refuse to accept life from the Saviour. Now the Bible claims, as we have said, that its teachings are suited to all men in all lands and all ages; Christ calls all the laboring and heavy-laden to himself, and promises them rest. There surely cannot be any mistake! It cannot be that Christianity is adapted, like philosophy, only to a select few! Can Christ's words be unintelligible to the great sinning and suffer-

ing world? But why are they not accepted everywhere and by all? Our parable answers, it is due to the nature of the *field*. The seed is everywhere good, the soil is not. This parable teaches that there are certain prerequisites, which are necessary to render faith in Christ possible; or rather, that there are certain obstacles in the unregenerate heart, which make faith impossible until they are removed. These are the characteristics of the soil in which a part of the seed is sown.

Sometimes it is indifference. This is the wayside heart. By the foot-falls of thought, word, and deed, paths of habit are made, in which the heart is trodden down into hardness and apathy, made no longer susceptible of religious impressions. Sometimes the hardness is not on the surface, but lower down. This is the rock. Here there may be plenty of surface susceptibility, even to the point of religious sentimentality, but no chance for depth of religious character, or permanence of religious life. Sometimes it is the divided heart, given in part to religion, but in part also to the world. This is the thorny ground. There can be no partnership between Christ and the world, and here the world has preëmpted the heart. Christ never takes the second place anywhere.

Such are the obstacles which prevent faith. None of them is intellectual. They are all moral, or rather immoral. There is here no case of doubt which cannot accept Christ, but only wills which will not accept him.

This is the problem presented by the field,—the field as Christ, the great sower, found it. We need not wonder if we encounter the same obstacles. We ought not to be discouraged if our words for Christ find no readier acceptance than his own. But to recognize these obstacles to faith is to begin to overcome them,—to rouse the indifferent, to melt the stubborn, to win the worldly. Let us show those for whom we work, that we realize their difficulties and their dangers, and so help them also to realize their situation. It may be that we can assist them to prepare for the good seed, by acquiring, through God's free grace, the "honest and good heart," which yields "thirtyfold, and sixtyfold, and a hundredfold."